



Information Commissioner's Office
Promoting public access to official information
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**Information Commissioner calls for new privacy safeguards
to protect against the surveillance society**

The Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, is today proposing new safeguards – including privacy impact assessments and inspection powers – to ensure public confidence in initiatives and technologies which could otherwise accelerate the growth of a surveillance society.

Giving evidence before the Home Affairs Select Committee the Information Commissioner will also call for stronger powers to allow his Office (the ICO) to carry out inspections and audits. Currently the Commissioner must gain consent before inspecting an organisation for compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, said: “People now understand that data protection is an essential barrier to excessive surveillance. But it is wrong that my Office cannot find out what is happening in practice without the consent of each organisation. The risks that arise from excessive surveillance affect both individuals and society as a whole. As well as risks such as identity mistakes and security breaches there can be unnecessary intrusion into people’s lives and loss of personal autonomy. There is also a concern that too much surveillance will create a climate of fear and suspicion. It is essential that before new surveillance technologies are introduced full consideration is given to the impact on individuals and that safeguards are in place to minimise intrusion.”

The introduction of privacy impact assessments will ensure organisations set out how they will minimise the threat to privacy and address all the risks of new surveillance arrangements prior to their implementation. These

assessments, which are already commonly used in other countries such as Australia and the USA, will ensure that ways of working do not lead to unacceptable intrusion into private lives. The Information Commissioner will also recommend that he is routinely consulted before significant new developments.

Richard Thomas said: “Last year I warned about the dangers of waking up to a surveillance society. While I do not believe that we are living in the type of society associated with totalitarian regimes it is important that there is a vigorous debate around the issue of surveillance - about where lines should be drawn and the restrictions and safeguards which are needed.

“I very much welcome the select committee’s inquiry which will raise awareness of and stimulate debate on the issues relating to a surveillance society. Many information gathering activities are essential and beneficial to modern life. But balance is needed and there must be limits. No one wants their electronic footprint to expose every aspect of their daily life. Positive action is required to ensure the potential risks do not manifest themselves. Otherwise the trust and confidence which individuals must have in all organisations that hold information about them will be placed in jeopardy.”

ENDS

If you need more information, please contact the Information Commissioner’s press office on 020 7025 7580 or visit the website at: www.ico.gov.uk

Notes to Editors

1. The Information Commissioner promotes public access to official information and protects personal information. The ICO is an independent body with specific responsibilities set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.
2. The ‘Surveillance Society’ report has been updated to include a new chapter. The updated report is now available on the ICO’s website www.ico.gov.uk
3. For more information about the Information Commissioner’s Office subscribe to our e-newsletter at www.ico.gov.uk.

4. The ICO is developing an Information Sharing Code of Practice and updating the CCTV code of practice. Both documents will be published during the coming year after full consultation.